

Too Much Rope....an interview with Stephen McCarthy, author of *Ned Kelly, A Widows Son*

At the recent Townsville SSIQ Northern group conference, the guest speaker – Mr Stephen McCarthy discussed his book “Ned Kelly, *A Widows Son*” and the research undertaken to locate Ned Kelly's ‘second’ hut. The research included the use of archival documents, historical maps, survey plans, the use of GNSS and other survey methods. The maps, drawings, images and narrative were used to try and resolve confusion and solve any mystery regarding Ned Kelly's second hut at Bullock Creek, Victoria. The book recreates a fascinating saga of colonial Australian history including evidence surrounding the events of an Australian folk hero and legend.

Tell the readers a bit about yourself?

I was born in Sydney Australia in 1954. My early working life was in the outback working for a survey firm as a survey technician surveying land and later as a civil engineering works assistant, draftsman and engineering surveyor. Some of my other interest includes working metals, gold prospecting, building and shooting muzzle-loading firearms as a black-powder shooter for over 35 years winning medals at state and national level.

I am a keen traveller to historic sites and have visited overseas sites such as Stonehenge, Custer's Little Big Horn, the Pyramids of Egypt and the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico.

Why the interest in Ned Kelly?

Ever since I was a teenager, I have been fascinated with the story of Ned Kelly and his gang. At the age of 15, I was given a book on bushrangers and after reading my first book, I immediately borrowed another book from the library to see if the first book was to be believed. From then on, I have read just about every book and bits of information I could find on the subject. I was unconvinced that the many biographies and historic accounts I had read were correct. There seemed to be so many discrepancies and contradictions. A Melbourne journalist's article of the day has often been quoted in various books and our research has led us to believe that he described what he saw without embellishment when visiting Kelly's fortified hut.

My brother Peter and I had been investigating the information on the beginnings of the Kelly gang for about seven years. We concluded that the location of their hideout huts would have a significant bearing on the telling of the Kelly story. We believed that the accepted location of the fortified hut was built entirely by the Kelly's and the place where Sergeant Kennedy's body was believed to have been found was incorrect. To determine the correct location of the Kelly sites I relied upon original information as was recorded at the time. There were no surveyed maps of the area in 1878. There are clues throughout the recorded documents as to when various events took place. By estimating the time it took them to build the huts, construct the fencing, ring-bark trees etc. including their travels and escapades, we think we've created a more plausible and complete time line covering the activities of the Kelly's. I have visited many of the better-known historic Kelly sites and in my mind, there has always been a problem in the logic of the accepted story. Over time, it became apparent to me that the answer lay where it all began, at the Kelly camp in Bullock Creek. To determine the most plausible history, we needed to locate the exact position of Ned's fortified hut.

Interest aside, how on earth did this lead you to writing a book on the subject?

Driving home, in 1994, I decided to fulfil one of my life's goals - I bought a booklet with a mud map of the Kelly camp at Bullock Creek and set out to visit the site of Ned's famous fortified hut. After visiting the Stringybark Creek picnic area, I attempted to find the site of the hut by walking down a bush track near Bullock Creek (now called Kelly's Creek). I had at least expected to find a historical site mark or tourist sign to mark the spot but instead, found nothing. We walked up Kelly's Creek and found a spot where the geography agreed with the journalist's 1878 description. The spot did not agree with our coordinate calculations for the location of the hut from the map. I contacted a Ned Kelly historian who accompanied us to Kelly's Creek, he took us to a different area and the coordinates from the map agreed with this location. Having located the position of the hut marked on the 1884 survey map we took photographs.

At the time, I was under the impression this was my final step. But this location didn't match the journalist's description. Back home, my confusion continued – as it was obvious the journalist's description was not that of the surveyor's recorded hut site. I became determined to find out why?

I awoke about midnight one night with the answer to a question that had been on my mind: Why were there contradictions about Ned Kelly's hut at Bullock Creek? I woke reciting Ned's quote, *"the police might come to our camp while we were away and manure Bullock Flat with us on our arrival."* The answer was exciting! I realised obviously there were two huts and the other the hut was where we went first. A serious miscalculation had been made. Ned's famous 'fortified hut' wasn't the renovated prospector's hut, as generally surmised. The Kelly's 'fortified hut' was located elsewhere but I needed a start point to search for the second hut.

Eventually we identified the location of the fortified hut, the fences and their true purpose. I wanted to write the book to explain:

- what the Kelly's were doing in the months leading up to the shoot-out with the police at Stringybark Creek;
- why the authorities focussed on Ned; and
- how Ned's claims 'stand up' to scrutiny?

Ned Kelly is the stuff of legend, can you provide us with some background?

Edward (Ned) Kelly was born in Australia around Christmas 1854, the son of Irish-born parents. His father had been transported as a convict to Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) for having stolen two pigs. His mother came as a child of 'bounty migrants'.

When his father 'Red' Kelly died, Ned was 11 years old. His mother moved the family and eventually settled at Eleven Mile Creek near the town of Greta, north-east Victoria. They 'took up' a small selection of poor land. The Kelly's tried to survive by various means, but not all of the efforts were legal! Between the age of 14 and 19, Ned had already spent nearly 3 years in prison for minor offences.

He was tall, physically powerful, strong-minded, intelligent, and could read and write, no mean feat for his era and circumstances. His spirit of fair-play and effort to prosper came into conflict with a system inadequate for dealing with the challenges of a diverse colony compounded by unyielding attitudes and actions. His strong determination to not be 'beaten down' led to the infamous 'Kelly outbreak'.

How does the 'hut' fit in with the story of the hunt for Ned?

The police killings at Stringybark Creek occurred early Friday morning 25th October 1878. Four police set out from Mansfield to search the Wombat Ranges for two brothers by the name of Kelly whom had been accused of attempting to murder a police constable. The police party was ambushed and on Sunday afternoon, a Constable McIntyre whom escaped the ambush rode into Mansfield with the shocking news that they had been ambushed by the Kelly's and two other persons. Two hours later, Constable McIntyre led a party of police back to the police camp at Stringybark Creek where the bodies of two policemen were recovered. Three days later, about half a mile away search parties found the body of Sergeant Kennedy killed after a running gun battle with the Kelly gang.

A few days later, a Melbourne journalist travelled to Mansfield and obtained the services of an acquaintance of the Kelly's. He was taken to the scene of the shootout and the spot where Sergeant Kennedy was found and of particular interest he was taken to Ned's secret farm a mile away from the police camp. The journalist wrote a description of what he saw: *"the stronghold of the Kelly's, situated on a small rise in the midst of a basin, bounded on the north by a small creek flowing down from between the hills, and on the south by a medium sized ridge, which, however is high enough to effectually conceal the hut from view in that direction... The plateau contains altogether, I should say, about 70 acres, and this is fenced in on three sides (north, south, and east) by a sapling, dog leg and brush fence, the west side requiring no fencing owing to the steepness of the hill which constitutes its boundary. In the creek flowing to the north of the hut, a considerable amount of gold-digging has*

been done... the workings are of such an extent that it would be utterly impossible for any four men to carry them on under a period of several months."

Did anyone else know of the hut?

The only other known witness (at least to the authorities) was a Sergeant James, who found the hut and said that the roof had been partly burnt. He had returned a year later to see if it had been used again.

How did you determine the start point of the whereabouts of the second hut?

The main clue was the gold diggings mapped by the surveyor that became known as Bullock Flat. The second hut was mentioned by Ned. A week before Ned's execution he dictated a letter (the Jerilderie letter) to a gaoler, addressed to the Governor. In it he stated: *"We had a house, two miles of fencing, 20 acres of ground cleared for the purpose of growing mangold wurzels and barley for the purposes of distilling whisky. We were also digging for gold. We had tools and sluice boxes and every requisite for the work. We had a place excavated close to the house for the purpose of erecting a small distil, so if anyone informed on us they would not get the most valuable or main distil that was further down the creek with the sugar and other requisites."*

According to the journalist there were large amounts of sugar, flour and the necessities of life stored in the fortified hut. Ned's fortified hut was built for distilling whisky and to make a living and not for use as a fort.

What survey skills and records did you rely upon?

In 1884 the region was surveyed for the first time. On the survey plan the surveyor attempted to show everything relating to the Kelly's. Peter gave me a book written by historian Keith McMenomy called "Ned Kelly, The Authentic Illustrated Story". It included the 1884 surveyors map and a photo purporting to be the fortified hut. About 1930, a saw mill was set up in the area where the Kelly's paddock was marked. The track to the mill was built right over "Kelly's hut".

I was in Melbourne in 1994 and on my way home I made my first effort to find the hut armed with a tourist centre mud map to the old saw mill track. On a second attempt with Peter we walked up Bullock Creek finding the basin, ridge and gold diggings, but no sign of the hut. We organised another trip with GPS, contour map, metal detector, compass and co-ordinates to Kelly's hut, 500 meters beyond the basin we found the 'unlikely' hut ruins. We made another trip with a local historian and were shown the site of the saw mill, but not the exact location of the hut. Peter and I returned with our wives and used a tape measure to locate the hut. We were satisfied that the hut in the photo was correct - but not satisfied it was the only hut. We calculated that a laneway to Holland's Creek would account for the fencing and acreage.

A fortified hut creates all sorts of visual imagery to the mind, just what was the 'fortified hut'?

It was said to be bullet-proof and made of 2 feet diameter logs with no windows and an iron door. The journalist described it as: *"Perhaps, however, the most startling site of all is the appearance of the hut and its immediate surroundings. Imagine a house erected of bullet-proof logs, fully 2ft. in diameter, one on the top of the other, crossed at the ends after the fashion of a chock and log fence, and with a door 6ft. high and 2ft. 6in. wide, made of stiff slabs, and plated with iron nearly a quarter of an inch in thickness, which was loopholed to fire through. The door is on the north side, opposite the gold workings in the creek, and a well-built log chimney occupies the greater part of the west end of the hut."*

To you, what was the significance of the fortified hut?

The location of the second hut casts doubt on the written history of the Kelly gang. We have looked at other original information, and found discrepancies from recorded history. You will have to read the book for the rest (*wry smile*).

Thanks Stephen and finally for our Ipswich connection: Did Dan Kelly escape Glenrowan and die at Ipswich?

No, original information indicates that Dan Kelly died at Glenrowan.

The legend survives and Ned Kelly was hanged at Old Melbourne Gaol on the 11th November, 1880, aged 26 years.

Shane Simmons

Authors note: Stephen's book is available at:

<http://www.nedkellythewidowsson.com.au/PURCHASE%20BOOK.html>

Product Details:

Printed: 200 pages, 24.5 x 17.5 cm, burst bound, black & white interior

Publisher: S.A. & R.D. McCarthy

Copyright: June 2007 by Stephen A. McCarthy

Language: English

Country: Australia

ISBN: 9780646475653

Catalogue-in-Publication Entry: 364.155092